

You First Podcast Episode 60: Disability Inclusive Campaigning

Maddie Crowley (00:00:00):

You're listening to You First: The Disability Rights Florida Podcast. In this episode, we talk with Neal Carter, Jess Moore Matthews, Sarah Blahovec, and Dom Kelly about disability-inclusive campaigning, how to reach disabled voters and the importance of accessible elections. Hi everyone. I'm Maddie.

Keith Casebonne (00:00:35):

And I'm Keith. And we're the hosts of You First. We have a great episode in store for you today. We're talking about the importance of disability accessibility in all things elections and campaigns.

Maddie Crowley (00:00:47):

Yeah. As Keith and I were scheduling some of these episodes for the beginning of the new year, we were like, "Is it too early to do an episode about an election or campaigns, what have you?" And we were like, "No, this is such a big election year, and there's elections, special elections, primaries, all that stuff throughout the year."

Keith Casebonne (00:01:12):

Caucuses, et cetera. Yeah.

Maddie Crowley (00:01:13):

Yeah, exactly.

Keith Casebonne (00:01:14):

Right.

Maddie Crowley (00:01:14):

So it's really never too early. But also, to be clear, we're not going to be getting super into any candidates or laws about voting or anything like that. We'll talk about voting,

accessible voting, voting laws, all of that stuff kind of down the line later in the year. So we'll have a couple episodes about this topic or variations of this topic throughout the year.

Keith Casebonne (00:01:36):

Yes.

Maddie Crowley (00:01:36):

But for now, this episode is more so about the culture of campaigning. Why the disability community feels excluded by political campaignings or getting involved with volunteering at polls and things like that, and how these guests, but other disabled folks in the space are really... what they're doing to challenge that.

Keith Casebonne (00:01:59):

Yeah, yeah. These four guests are going to discuss how and why elected officials campaign for election or reelection, how they miss out on a huge voting block, the disability community. So they talk about how the four of them have thought broader about the issue, how they reach voters in historically hard-to-reach places, what digital accessible campaign tools they use for, let's say, text banking, emails, that sort of thing, and what campaign culture things they just don't subscribe to, and honestly, a lot more.

Maddie Crowley (00:02:29):

Yeah, like I mentioned, we're going to get to a lot of voting law stuff, what you need to vote, accessible voting, all that stuff later down the line. This is more so like, hey, if you're listening to this and someone who is running for office, or you want to run for office, or you like to volunteer at the polls, whatever it might be, this is the episode that we want everybody related to that space to listen to or to send to someone they know that works in that space.

(00:02:55):

Because what these guests talk about is so, so important to challenging a lot of the stereotypes and just like that toxic positivity, toxic work hard culture that exists in campaigning. So we really loved this conversation, and we had off some guests. So without further ado-

Keith Casebonne (00:03:16):

[inaudible 00:03:17].

Maddie Crowley (00:03:17):

... let's get into some of these guests. So first up, we'll give a brief bio of Jess Moore Matthews. Jess is the founder and chief good troublemaker at Backbone Digital Leaders. Jess's experience in digital marketing and organizing comes from her leadership on several presidential and down-ballot campaigns, as well as in industries from tech to state and local government. She's a digital coach with the National Democratic Training Committee and a mentor to many, as her activism has always empowered underestimated leaders to claim their seat at the table. Jess is awesome and a huge role model of mine, so always great to talk to her.

Keith Casebonne (00:03:56):

Yeah, and what a great title too, chief good troublemaker. That's-

Maddie Crowley (00:03:59):

I know.

Keith Casebonne (00:04:00):

... brilliant. That's beautiful.

Maddie Crowley (00:04:01):

Yeah, she's awesome.

Keith Casebonne (00:04:02):

Well, next up... She is. So next up, we have Dom Kelly, and Dom Kelly is the co-founder, president, and CEO of New Disabled South a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, as well as New Disabled South Rising, its 501(c)(4) arm. He previously served as both the Georgia Fundraising director and the senior advisor for disability for Stacey Abrams campaign for Governor of Georgia.

(00:04:27):

Prior to that, he was senior fundraising manager and a strategic advisor for disability at Fair Fight Action, the voting rights organization founded by Stacey Abrams, where he also created and led the organization's disability council composed of prominent disability advocates and policy experts from across the country. Again, just a phenomenal individual with such deep levels of experience in this area is so much great stuff to say.

Maddie Crowley (00:04:54):

Yeah, for sure. And next, we're going to split up these two bios, but you know them, you love them. They're the leaders of Disability Victory. So, first up, we have Neal Carter. Neal Carter is the co-founder, co-director, and vice president at Disability Victory. He is also the founder and principal of Nu View Consulting, LLC. Neal has been spearheading political outreach operations and campaign since 2002.

(00:05:22):

Neal is one of the foremost voices and field operations campaign strategy and candidate training in the United States. He has worked in campaign management on a federal, state, and local levels throughout the United States. And under his leadership, Nu View Consulting has elected world leaders, trained future elected officials, and successfully past progressive policy protecting the most marginalized communities.

Keith Casebonne (00:05:46):

And then so last but not least, we have Sarah Blahovec, who is also the co-founder and co-director, and in this case, president of Disability Victory.

Maddie Crowley (00:05:55):

The best duo out there.

Keith Casebonne (00:05:57):

Yeah, they're amazing. Sarah is a disability civic engagement subject matter expert. She works with organizations to address the barriers to voting and running for office for the one in four Americans who have a disability and has worked with organizations including the Carter Center's Democracy Program, the American Association of People with Disabilities, the Democratic National Committee, and the Center for Civic Design.

(00:06:22):

She is the former voting rights and civic engagement director for the National Council on Independent Living, where she advocated for greater accessibility in elections and address barriers to running for office for people with disabilities. Wow. If you're not already excited about this discussion, then I don't know what you've been listening or reading, but yeah, this is great.

Maddie Crowley (00:06:43):

Yeah, so let's get into it. Let's hear from our guests. Hey, everyone. Thank you so much for being on the podcast today. It's truly so exciting and such an honor to have you here with us. If y'all could take a moment to introduce yourself, give a brief visual description of yourself and tell us how did you get into this work.

Sarah Blahovec (00:07:04):

Hi, my name is Sarah Blahovec. I am a white woman with brown hair that I'm wearing in a ponytail. I wear glasses and a blue shirt. I'm sitting in my joint dining/living/office, so I am the... Well, I wear multiple hats. So I am the co-founder, co-director, and president of Disability Victory, which is a 501(c)(4) that formed in 2023 to train more disabled people to run for elected office and work on campaigns.

(00:07:35):

And then I also work in terms of some of my other jobs, I am a disability civic engagement expert. I work with the Carter Center's US Democracy Program and some other organizations to work on voting rights, disability voting rights. And in terms of how I got in this work, I did not come into my disability identity until college or after, despite the fact that I was diagnosed with Crohn's Disease at the age of 15.

(00:08:03):

It's a very medicalized diagnosis where you're not given a lot of information on disability advocacy. And so I really was able to find our community after college and learn from some amazing people like Alice Wong, like Rebecca Cokley, some great folks that I've had the opportunity to meet over the years. Started working with Neal back in what, 2017 or 2018? And so yeah, I will cut it off there.

Dom Kelly (00:08:32):

I am Dom Kelly, [inaudible 00:08:34] him pronouns. I am a white man with brown curly hair wearing an orange sweater, and I'm sitting in front of a lot of things on my wall, records and pictures and a bookshelf and candles and all sorts of things. And I am the co-founder, president, and CEO of New Disabled South. We're the first and only regional disability organization in the country focused on advancing disability rights and disability justice in 14 Southern states through policy change and narrative change.

(00:09:12):

And I came to this work... I was doing work in progressive spaces and always trying to figure out how I could carve out some work around disability because, almost always, there was

no consideration of disability in those spaces. I was doing organizing outside of my day job and always trying to bring a disability lens to that work. And eventually started getting really interested in voting rights and worked at a voting rights organization and also got to know lots of people in the community, mainly on Twitter. And that really opened up my network and my community. And that's also really how I got to know pretty much all these amazing folks here on this podcast as well. So yeah, that's me.

Jess Moore Matthews (00:10:07):

All right. Hi, everyone. I am Jess Moore Matthews. My pronouns are she/her/hers. I am a Black woman with medium brown skin. My hair is pulled back in a low bun today, but I'm wearing a beige headband as well. And I'm wearing a red shirt that says, "Love your neighbor." Shout out to Mr. Rogers. I am sitting in front of a bookshelf that features books, an award I was recently given by New Disabled South. Thank you New Disabled South. And yeah, really happy to be here. How did I get into this work?

(00:10:42):

Well, I am currently the founder and chief good troublemaker at Backbone Digital Leaders. We are an organization of Black women spearheading a revolution at the ballot box and beyond through digital accessibility. And I presented on digital accessibility actually to Dom's cohort at New Leaders Council back in, I believe, 2020. And I think that presentation and Dom reaching out to me afterward to thank me for talking about accessibility might have been one of my first introductions to this community. I had been working on digital accessibility at the New York City Mayor's Office for the previous years, where we hosted the annual Digital Accessibility Conference with the Mayor's Office for people with disabilities. And prior to that, my understanding of disability was really personal. Like Sarah, I was diagnosed with a chronic illness, multiple sclerosis, at 19, and everything I knew about disability was based on my experiences with my doctor and my family. So learning about this community and really learning about it from a lot of the folks who are on this call right now, it's been a real privilege and honor. And even though I've had MS for 15 years, I do feel very new to this community, and I'm just happy to be here.

Neal Carter (00:12:03):

I guess I will go last. My name is Neal Carter. I use he/him/his pronouns. I'm a Black man in a blue shirt in a predominantly white room with one picture directly behind me, and I'm sitting in front of a desk mic. And how did I get into this work? Hopefully, I don't age myself here. But I have been in the electoral space for most, if not all, of my life. I wear many hats in addition.

(00:12:38):

So I am the co-founder, co-director, and vice president of Disability Victory, along with Sarah. I am the founder and principal of Nu View Consulting, the first Black and disabled-owned general consulting firm in the country. I am the founder of the Black Consultant Group, the largest membership organization of Black consultants in the country. I think that's it for now. That's it for all the relevant organizations.

(00:13:04):

How did I get into this work? I've been in the consulting industry, specifically in the electoral justice work, for 21 years now. I've been disabled my entire life, was diagnosed with spina bifida at birth, and have been living my Black-disabled life ever since. And yeah, just excited to have this conversation with you all with folks I know and folks that I don't. So really excited for this conversation.

Keith Casebonne (00:13:34):

Well, thanks all for being here. It's a real privilege to have you all as guests on our podcast today. I'm Keith. I'm the co-host along with Maddie. I am a white male with brown hair and a sort of gray salt and pepper beard wearing a black shirt in my office with a beige wall background and a single piece of art behind me. And let's go ahead and dive in.

(00:13:55):

So for those of you who have done campaign work, can you describe some of the unique challenges involved in creating and running campaigns that are truly responsive to the needs of the disabled community? And maybe give some examples of what a truly responsive campaign should look like and then counter in what ways are most campaigns lacking that.

Dom Kelly (00:14:17):

Yeah, I love that question because I could talk about this forever. Yeah, I mean, I think, first and foremost, campaign culture is really inherently inaccessible for a number of reasons. The culture is really, everything's urgent. It is very easy to burn out. You are expected to be on at all times. And what that does is really exclude a lot of people in our community, especially those with chronic illnesses who really want to be involved in this kind of work, who literally, physically cannot meet the expectations of a campaign. And to some extent, it's understandable when someone is running for office that you have to respond to things.

(00:15:07):

There's rapid response needs. There's conflict that comes up, things in the media, all those things are real, and the expectations are that you're always on. And actually, back in 2020 I, on my own, because I just was curious, decided to do a little survey and had some friends on Twitter help amplify it. And one of the questions was... I mean, really it was about disabled folks experience trying to work on campaigns or working on campaigns. And it was 90-something percent. I don't have the stats in front of me, but 90-something percent of folks in our community had felt or had experienced ableism in a campaign or in a progressive organization, and mainly due to an inaccessible work culture and environment.

(00:15:57):

And so I think that's a huge issue. Also, campaigns typically don't think about disability holistically. They don't think about reaching disabled voters in their field programs. They don't think about... They may very rarely think about policy. They may have a disability policy platform, but that's also not a standard. Oftentimes, they think about disabled people when they need to look good or get a good photo op, but they don't think about the fact that we're voters. They don't think about how to reach voters in an accessible way or use technology that is screen reader accessible when they do their phone banking or texting programs.

(00:16:48):

And just last thing I'll say is there's a lot that can and should be done by campaigns that aren't. And when I was senior advisor on Stacey Abrams last gubernatorial race, we were in a position where we had the money to build a disability engagement accessibility team. I led that department, and we had over a dozen staff focused specifically on accessibility throughout the campaign, focused on reaching disabled voters, disability policy, engagement with the community, constituent outreach, that kind of thing. But that is rare, and most campaigns are struggling to raise money and didn't raise the kind of money that our campaign did.

(00:17:36):

We also had full-time ASL interpreters on staff for events for deaf staff that we had across different departments. So when I think about presidential campaigns, there's really no excuse why they can't do those things, but it's really atypical. So it is structural barriers, and it's an unwillingness, I think, on the part of candidates and folks who have been in electoral politics for a long time to change the way that they do things.

Jess Moore Matthews (00:18:04):

Yeah, I can add to that. I really got into the work that I'm doing now after coming off of two presidential campaigns in 2020. And what's interesting is I remember disability coming up in a few ways. The first campaign, the first presidential, I remember it being about offering health benefits to the folks on staff. We made a comment to the candidate that if we were going to say the words Medicare for All and Health Justice, that these values needed to be reflected in their policy platform.

(00:18:46):

And so very quickly, it became a conversation around, "Well, how much is it? Who needs health insurance surprise to everyone who was on the campaign? What's the cost?" And it became a very logistical question as to how are we living our values. And, "Oh my gosh, I can't believe all these things are going to be public record, whether we are offering health insurance or how much we're paying our interns." The second presidential campaign, I remember disability coming up when we were trying to find a field office, and it was about finding an accessible field office because, thankfully, we had someone on the team who was in a wheelchair and was coming along with us to tour these various field offices.

(00:19:27):

And so I remember that was something, again, that came up because someone was in the room because someone advocated. And so, full disclosure, that second presidential was the Warren campaign, and I know she's one of the few presidential candidates who did put out a disability policy plan. But I think, again, to Dom's point and into these examples, it often requires advocates in the room who are bringing these things to the forefront.

Neal Carter (00:19:58):

I think, for me, this is Neal Carter speaking. I think for me, as I think about how much electoral politics has changed in the last 15 years in terms of just how campaigns navigate, not just the issues of the day, but also because there are [inaudible 00:20:19]... If you are involved in this work, there are literally issues every day. I think everybody who's a feature today can attest to that. For me, as I think about how disability intersects with campaigns and electoral work and how, in some campaigns, they are missing. In others, they play a vital role.

(00:20:46):

I can say that as someone who can remember, again, don't want to age myself, but as someone that can remember when canvassing didn't include going on a web portal and mapping out virtually where you can actually identify voters and then printing that out and

then knocking on those doors. There was a time when that kind of capability, that kind of technology, wasn't available. So you literally had to... And if you're disabled, you have to think about... we as disabled people have to think about accessibility literally every second of the day.

(00:21:26):

So you amplify that on the campaign trail. Whether you're a candidate, a volunteer, campaign staff, consultant, in my case, you actively have to think about, "Okay, how can I adapt whatever I'm doing related to this campaign in my daily life and work?" And with campaign work, you have to deal with that layer of internalized ableism that we all, as disabled people, have to deal with. But then it's the external ableism that we interact with, whether it's covert or overt from the folks on the campaign staff, whether it's the candidate themselves or, in my case, the client, it could be very treacherous very early and very often.

(00:22:06):

And like I said, I can remember a time when you didn't have the technology to create a canvassing apparatus to easily get to and from a location and then have your... Now, there is technology via GPS where you can actually track your canvassers. And if you are disabled, imagine for a second, imagine a scenario where you, as a disabled canvasser, are with able-bodied folks knocking on doors, and your progress is being tracked by a senior-level official on the campaign, and you're knocking on those doors and they can constantly see where you are on the GPS.

(00:22:48):

And imagine for a second you get a text message from that senior staff, and they're saying, "Why is it taking you so long to get from this house to this house while you could be actively engaging with the voter?" That has happened to me, right, despite the fact that I was-

Neal Carter (00:23:03):

Has happened to me, despite the fact that I was a consultant. Consultants, don't think for a second that consultants don't knock on doors. We do, first of all, but to have another person on the campaign staff think that they could text me out of the blue, and of course I had to correct them first of all and say, "First of all, you don't talk to campaign staff this way, consultants or volunteers. This is just not how you engage with people. That's completely abhorrent and inhumane." But this is something that doesn't get talked about that much and should be talked about more within the context of electoral politics within the context of electoral justice and those intersections with disability justice.

Sarah Blahovec (00:23:43):

And I'll just add, I think that it's really an issue of culture and campaigns. The culture is not built for disability, but the culture is not built for flexibility in general. There's a deadline that you have to meet election day and the campaigns are really set up to running through 20 something and maybe 30 something campaign staff and volunteers who they see as having endless energy and enthusiasm.

(00:24:12):

And so people are encouraged to put all their responsibilities aside outside of work. There's a lot of labor issues with campaigns and there's been a really good trend in recent years of campaigns and political parties starting to unionize because this is also a labor issue. It's very much tied to the hours on campaigns, the benefits. And there needs to be something that is done that protects the staff from being running to the ground with how much work that they have to do because it's just an unsustainable environment.

(00:24:46):

And that environment is especially unsustainable if you're someone with a disability. And that also leads to a lack of thinking about where can disabled people fit in campaigns? Because we're for people who aren't as familiar with disability, we're seen as we're going to be slowing down that progress because we have to think about how are we going to accommodate you? And they don't want to do that. And sometimes, and first thing, it's still a legal requirement, campaigns might be temporary organizations, but you still do have to follow disability employment law.

(00:25:21):

So that's part of it. But also again, trying to re-envision how we think about campaigns and seeing it through sustainability and not just trying to extract as much labor and time out of your volunteers and your staff as possible without thinking about their needs and whether those needs are taking care of your family, going to the doctors, being able to get rest. These are all really important things.

Maddie Crowley (00:25:50):

This is Maddie. Thank you all for that insight. And I want to also thank Neal and others for modeling accessibility to say this is so-and-so when we're talking. So I apologize for not setting that expectation from the beginning. So if we can do our best to do that moving forward, that'd be great just because that helps with folks using the transcript and just tuning in. And since I didn't provide my visual description before and a little bit about me,

I'll just do that very briefly. My name is Maddie. I'm a white non-binary person. I have blondish hair, red glasses, I'm wearing a white colored shirt. I have a variety of disabilities, chronic illness, muscular dystrophy. I identify as neuro diverse, cyborg, have long Covid, so I'm in this with y'all. But anyways, I just wanted to connect with that a bit.

(00:26:43):

And as we continue this conversation, y'all laid the foundation as far as saying everything that is inaccessible and is not working in campaign work and political activism. And I'm really curious to hear because all of y'all are doing such good work as far as the opposite, which is to create accessible trainings, campaigns, content, all the like. So I'd love to learn about that and also flagging something that Sarah just said. In what ways do we need to consider disability justice accessibility for campaigns in thinking about it as a labor issue and then how it intersects in other contexts and other things that people listening may not be tying together and might just be thinking, we'll talk about it, but accessible phone banking, we're talking about that, but we're also talking about how people should have healthcare. So how can we explain the work y'all are doing and how do we move past where we have been into bringing accessibility and disability justice into this work?

Neal Carter (00:27:57):

I think the easy answer is hire more disabled people. That's the easy answer. Hire more disabled people, not just as campaign staff. Hire more disabled people as senior staff, hire more disabled people as consultants, because we are unfortunately our best advocates. We understand that while there's a lot of well-meaning able-bodied folks out there in the world, we also understand, again, this is Neal Carter speaking, that we understand that able-bodied folks, while they are well-meaning may not be our best advocates, they may think they are. They may think by opening a door, pulling out a chair, attempting to make a car seat more comfortable, pulling a keyboard closer, pulling a monitor further away. I'm just trying to think of the many things that I've gone through in campaign office right now, the many really bad examples and how well-meaning folks are not doing a good job.

(00:29:05):

And tying in Sarah's point as well about the labor issue, I mean even from a labor front, I would say from an electoral fund, it's a matter of hiring more disabled people in senior and managerial roles overall. But in addition, I would say from a labor standpoint, it's putting disabled people in a position to be successful and giving them the tools to maintain that success rate and having regular conversations with them. Unfortunately, and to Sarah's point, disabled people in general in campaign work are thought of as commodities.

(00:29:46):

This is not the first time in "democracy" that people have been thought up as commodities. So with that being said, we have to think about this beyond, and I know that's hard for folks to think beyond the scope of their own lived experience, but sometimes you have to think beyond that and invest in thought processes from things that are going to make you uncomfortable, like having conversations with disabled people and seeing them as human, and that means putting them in positions to be successful.

Jess Moore Matthews (00:30:25):

I want to add to Neal, who is always very wise, might I add, this is just speaking, I think once campaigns hire more disabled people and once disabled folks are in the room, or let's say allies are in the room, it's really important to model advocacy to shape the culture that is being created on the campaign. So what that could look like is we're all going around introducing ourselves to one another for the first time. You're the last person to go and no one may have modeled a visual description. So now you're doing that and maybe also naming your access needs for the meeting. Folks may be Googling what does an access need, but really just setting some precedence and some culture so that in future meetings other folks may do the same thing. One of the questions I find transformative to ask is how can we make this more accessible?

(00:31:24):

It's one of the first questions I ask when I'm talking to my clients at backbone and we're talking about a training or if you have the privilege of being there for the early stages of a campaign and you're literally mapping out what's our tagline? What do we care about? What are we doing? How can we make this more accessible? How can we make sure we're centering disabled voters? And asking that one simple question at the very beginning of a process can completely transform what you're doing. And a lot of times folks aren't used to answering that question. We'll pause and get quiet for a second training that we're about to do next week.

(00:32:02):

Actually, we asked this company who's on the corporate area, we said, "What accessibility needs do you anticipate?" And they all got quiet like, "Oh, well good question. Can we get back to you on that?" It turns out they actually have employees on every continent except Antarctica. And I was like, "Could there be some language, some translation needs? Well, everyone works in English, but actually that could be helpful." I mean, these are questions

that folks have not been probed to think about often enough. And so I think modeling that disability culture and advocacy can really inspire and encourage others to do the same.

Sarah Blahovec (00:32:44):

Yeah, I think that's all. Echoing all that, this is Sarah. I think that in the disability community, we are also still having to do a lot of this self-advocacy because just waiting for non-disabled people to do the right thing, it's not going to be a winning strategy just because first thing, some of them aren't going to do it, aren't going to want to do it, some of them don't know how.

(00:33:10):

And so that's why we are at Disability Victory. We're creating the resources that are by and for disabled people to learn about campaigning because we really need our community to, and folks like Dom and Neal and Jess talk about some of these challenges that come up in campaigns and well, how did they deal with them? How do we make the entire campaigning process more accessible? And that's something where we need collective community knowledge to figure that out because the barriers that one disabled person faces on a campaign can be completely different from what someone else faces.

(00:33:45):

And so we need to really bring the community together to figure out, well, okay, how can we make canvassing more accessible? How can we do phone banking? What are the challenges that come up with that? But also beyond that, it is we need campaigns, political parties, other movement organizations to be regularly working with. And that means also hiring disabled people, disabled organizations, and actually implementing it. I can't tell how many times I've done a training on accessibility. Basic things around add alternative text to your graphics or add captions to your videos, and they do the training and they're like, "Oh, this is great." And then they don't start implementing it. And so it's fine to get a training, but you need to actually implement the things that people are teaching about accessibility. And a lot of these things are really simple. They don't cost much money, they don't take very much time to do.

(00:34:49):

People sometimes they think automatically jump to, oh, accessibility must cost money. I'm thinking web developers and ASL. And while there are parts of accessibility that do require a budget and you need to plan for those as well, a lot of these things are really simple and there's really a low threshold for entering in and trying to make things more

accessible. And it's something that campaigns of every size can do where maybe you're a small local campaign and maybe you don't have the budget to hire an accessible web developer, but you can look at, there's information on creating Squarespace pages with accessibility and how you're able to test these pages and see if they work. But you can add captions to videos. You can make sure that all of your content on social media is accessible. So it's about starting to practice accessibility consistently

Dom Kelly (00:35:42):

And just, I don't have really much else to add because they all hit the nail on the head. This is Dom speaking. But just as an example, I managed a local mayoral race and from the start, this was not a hundred million dollars race. The gubernatorial race I worked on, this was less than a hundred thousand dollars mayoral race, which is still quite a bit, but we didn't have the money to make sure we to do some of the things that we did on Southern race I worked on. So there were basic things that we made sure we did, had captions for every single video.

(00:36:19):

We actually hired Jess's team to do digital ads and made sure that... Because I trusted Jess and knew that's what Jess and her team did, there was no question in my mind that our content wouldn't be accessible. And so there were just basic things that we were able to do that also like the candidate and others on the team who had worked on campaigns probably wouldn't have thought about because it wasn't something that had crossed their radar.

(00:36:50):

So I think that's just driving home the point that there are basic things that any campaign that like Sarah said, that any campaign can do, and also making sure you have disabled folks in the room, even if they're not working on disability related, in a role focused on disability. I was managing the campaign that was not disability specific, but I brought that lens and perspective. That's why it's so important to have our community in the room.

Maddie Crowley (00:37:19):

Yeah, definitely. I appreciate all that y'all shared, and I think as y'all explained, I think there were different instances where y'all mentioned, okay, accessibility tools, accessible phone banking, things like that. So for folks that are listening, could you share some of those resources, some of those programs? I know y'all are such a great resource and we'll definitely link to your organizations and your social media and things so people can follow

and continue to learn more from you. But what are some of those tools for people who could leave listening or reading the transcript right now to go and tell their boss, "Hey, we should get this text banking program." What kind of things are out there?

Jess Moore Matthews (00:38:03):

I can start by talking a little bit about the social media email side. So one of the things I wanted to bring up as Sarah was speaking, this is Jess speaking right now, is that when you are creating a content calendar on a campaign, however that content calendar looks, I like to do mine and Google Sheets. Simply including a column for alt text is again, transformative for all of your social media content. Because as you're planning your content, what you're going to post, linking to whatever is the multimedia you're going to share, you're essentially building in a step to describe the image. So when you transfer that alt text into your scheduling platform, we like Hootsuite, Sprout Social is also a good one. Most of these platforms offer the ability to add alternative texts, although Instagram can get a little wonky sometimes. Having that as a step in your content planning process is major.

(00:39:03):

There are lots of email platforms that also allow you to add alt text in the platform, but again, I would plan when you're still in Google Drive or however your team is working in that collaborative way to build it in as you're writing the email, build it in as you're writing the social media posts. So that's what I'll say on the content marketing side. And then as for apps and things for captions, I want to remind everyone always that Instagram does allow you to add captions automatically. Same with Facebook. You'll just want to always make sure that you're checking that transcription to make sure it's accurate. I like the Captions app, but I know it is freemium, so up to a certain point you do have to pay. But I do think that fee is nominal and you can make really cool captions with that app. So those are just two that I like. You can also use Canva for captions, by the way.

Dom Kelly (00:40:03):

Yeah, this is Dom. In terms of text banking, phone banking, I will say that there's not one platform or for either of those or both. That is completely perfect in terms of accessibility. There have been a lot of folks who have tried to work with some of these companies to improve. It really has, in my experience, come down to some folks in our community having to do testing and figure out which works best for screen readers and scale to win as a texting platform that I've used, that seems to be, for the most part, screen reader accessible for the texter and the person receiving the text.

(00:40:42):

Yeah, I've used for phone banking, a few different platforms, but right within Vote Builder you can do phone banking. It's also not the most accessible. But I think really what it comes down to is really having to test with screen readers, really having to test with users on both ends to make sure that it's the most accessible. And part of what we're trying to do is trying to work with some of these companies to improve their technology and make sure that they're fully accessible. And one other thought on that is there are other ways, and I think campaigns need to be, and movement orgs who do voter contact, have to be creative in how they reach voters because a lot of these platforms are not fully accessible.

(00:41:36):

So in the past with reaching the deaf community, for example, the deaf community has video relay and we can figure out how to use video relay to, and we did, for our phone bankers to actually make calls. And so yeah, it's not necessarily just about find the platform as fully accessible. Unfortunately, I don't think there is a current platform that is fully accessible, but how do you reach voters in a way and think differently about it. Using video relay to do phone calls is not going to... But you're not necessarily going to blow through a thousand calls and reach the numbers that most campaigns want to reach in the short amount of time, but you're going to reach specific voters and you're going to reach voters in a more accessible way and have more quality connections with voters. And I think that has a much more value than trying to blow through a bunch of text or calls quickly and rapidly.

Sarah Blahovec (00:42:36):

Yeah, I agree on there not being really one perfect solution, one thing I'll say is the pandemic brought up the potential for changing how we do things. Unfortunately that has, because people have mostly gone back to normal, that has really reversed. So one of the folks that Neal introduced me to was at Grassroots Unwired, which had a virtual canvassing tool called IC Voters. And unfortunately this is something that was rolled out during 2020 and 2021, and they don't really use it anymore, so it hasn't been updated in a long time, but it was really an integrated tool where you could reach out to people via text or via phone and then send a link to join a virtual meeting space.

(00:43:22):

And so this was whenever people were doing social distancing. And so again, that tool's not really in use anymore. I think it's still really available, but because things have reverted back to completely going door to door, and there are of course benefits to that for voters

with disabilities, but also for candidates and campaign staff and volunteers, the possibility of virtual canvassing offers just another tool that could have been used, and that's something that could be used in other contexts too, sending a Zoom link, something like that.

(00:43:56):

So hopefully we can continue to innovate in terms of the way that we do campaign work, but also I think it's these vendors and these tech companies and campaigns that are working on creating new and innovative solutions, or even just the ones that have been mainstays in the space. They also need disabled people on their team and they need to be doing user testing and accessibility testing with actual disabled people with different disabilities, as well as people who are tech experts who are hopefully also people with disabilities.

Jess Moore Matthews (00:44:32):

This is Jess. It feels like a good time to shamelessly plug that I will be facilitating my first user test on digital organizing technology this spring. So definitely get in touch with me if you're interested in testing digital organizing software. I'm very excited to be doing this.

Neal Carter (00:44:49):

If you aren't going to plug that, Jess, I was getting ready to plug that, so I'm glad you did that. This is Neal. So as Sarah indicated, as Dom indicated, as Jess indicated, there really isn't a whole lot of technology readily available for campaigns to make them more accessible outside of campaigns. Being more conscious of disabled people's humanity. As disabled people in campaigns, the first thing should be an ask to the disabled person on whatever level of the campaign they are on, "How can I make this campaign more accessible to you?"

(00:45:31):

That's the question. I realized I answered your question with a question, I apologize. But that's really where it is. You have to be able to, as a campaign, internally ask that question and then you're not going to have the answer. So then you ask the disabled people on your staff or your consultants or what have you, your volunteers, you ask them that question and then you take it a step and then it's amplify a step further if your candidate is disabled-

Neal Carter (00:46:01):

If your candidate is disabled, then there are additional layers, additional barriers that you have to work through. And in some cases, that accessibility issue may not come up until it is brought up, unfortunately, in some cases, by the candidates that you're running against. Sometimes they disclose the disability of the campaign before you get a chance to, before you get a chance to tell your own story. I've had that happen several times. The most recent example of that happening, it wasn't a client of mine, but the most recent example of that was in the Pennsylvania Senate, a US Senate race. It wasn't a self-disclosure situation, which was unfortunate. And that's all I'll speak to.

(00:46:52):

I think there are plenty of opportunities for folks in campaign spaces to be more proactive in finding technology. I think I'd be remiss if I didn't say, "well, Google's right there," but Google is right there. But also, ask the disabled people on your campaign, how can I make this more accessible? That should be the immediate question that you ask before, because what you don't want to do, is get the wrong assistive technology, which I've had that experience before where screen readers are purchased for folks that aren't low vision.

(00:47:38):

I've been a part of campaigns where ADA compliance was questioned when it didn't need to be, because ADA compliance should be a thing for campaign structures without having disabled people involved. That should just be something that shouldn't need to even be in question. I've had situations where assistive technology has been purchased without the consent of the disabled people on the campaign staff or volunteers, because the campaign staff, the volunteers didn't care to ask the disabled people on the staff, what do you need? How can I help? So that's where it starts.

Jess Moore Matthews (00:48:17):

And I feel like a lot of what Neal is describing is not to get too academic. Sorry, I didn't mention that I also teach a digital accessibility class at NYU. But I think what Neal, this is Jess, I think what Neal is describing is really resisting the urge, the very American urge to approach things from a colonialist mindset where you're treating people as commodities, everyone's the same, you're assuming everyone's needs are the same, and you're also assuming that you know what they need, right? You're not asking what everyone's individual needs are.

(00:48:51):

This way of thinking is really not natural if you grew up in this country, and we have to be so intentional about resisting it in all forms because I think this is our default way of being. We're all born in this soup, on this gumbo, so to speak. My family's from Louisiana, and we have to think what is the opposite of what this society would do. And it really requires that we look at each other as individuals with unique needs differences. I just literally spoke to a deaf activist the other week. She was like, "I hate American Sign Language. I don't even believe in it." And I'm just like, "Okay, well never mind. I was going to get an ASL interpreter for you, but this is not your thing." Not making any assumption as to what needs could be. And really just asking the question and allowing people, their agency is huge.

Keith Casebonne (00:49:48):

This is Keith. First of all, most importantly, I'm from Louisiana too and just had gumbo at Christmas and it was really great.

Jess Moore Matthews (00:49:53):

I love Christmas gumbo.

Keith Casebonne (00:49:54):

Oh yeah, definitely. But also back to the accessibility topic, I think I can speak for Maddie as well. As parts of the digital communications team here at Disability Rights Florida, we run into this all the time. And of course, it can be so hard to find software that actually contains the accessibility features that you need to get the content out there, and you're always going back and hacking into things, essentially, trying to figure out how to make this document accessible or this piece of the website accessible and so on.

(00:50:22):

A couple of things we have found too, is we use social pilot for our social media scheduling, and it does have alt text and some accessibility features. Constant contact for our mailing list has some accessibility features. That's another, just to throw out a couple of resources that we're familiar with and have used. But to turn the conversation not too far off actually, because accessibility is about reaching people, and this question is also about reaching people, but just in a different way. Of course, people with disabilities can live in rural areas. They might live in group homes or institutions, other places like that. So how can campaigns or even people in office already, conduct better outreach to meet the needs of constituents residing in rural or congregate living settings?

Dom Kelly (00:51:18):

Yeah, so this is Dom speaking. That is a big thing that we did on Stacey Abrams campaign. I brought Stacey to congregate settings to talk to voters who had never ever spoken to a candidate, an elected official, had never spoken to an organizer ever. A lot of folks are just forgotten about. If they're not on a voter contact list or they're not in a place where a canvasser can knock on their door, then they're forgotten about very often. And so that's also now what we are doing at New Disabled South. Our primary work this election year is focused on reaching disabled voters in places where organizers typically don't go. So we're building out a whole program to reach voters in congregate settings in the south, and is primarily focused on rural areas of the south. So really what needs to happen is it just needs to be prioritized.

(00:52:28):

And with voter contact programs, it is so often about quantity versus quality. It is, you have to knock X number of doors in a certain amount of time, and if you can knock all those doors, then your chances of winning are greater, which is true. You need to knock doors, you need to talk to voters. That is how you win. But if we're focused simply on numbers, you're going to miss a large percentage of voters who care about or will likely care about the issues that the candidate cares about. And so I think both can go hand in hand. You can have a full-fledged field program where you're knocking a million doors, whatever that program is. You can absolutely do that and invest the time in going into congregate settings, nursing homes, group homes, and having intentional conversations.

(00:53:32):

There's a big movement to do what's called deep canvassing, which is a very different structure than regular canvassing, where with regular canvassing, you have a script, you really follow it to a T. Your goal is to knock it out really quickly, get them the literature that they need, hit that door two, three times, and that's it. Go to the next one. Deep canvassing is really having the time to sit down with a voter and talk to them about an issue. In fact, deep canvassing was really instrumental in moving people toward marriage equality, having these deep conversations with people, understanding their perspective, and really spending the time to move them toward an issue or move them toward a candidate. And I think that approach can be taken when we're talking about reaching disabled voters in places that are, "hard to reach," which really, I don't think it's that hard to reach if you're really prioritizing the disability community in your voter contact.

(00:54:34):

So yeah, I think campaigns can do a much better job of prioritizing that. I think movement orgs who are doing voter contact or out reaching constituents on certain issues, they have

to prioritize spending the time with folks who may not be on a door knocking list. They may not. When you cut turf, you're probably not going to find this congregate setting in your turf. You're probably not going to go and knock those doors. You have to think differently about how you reach those folks. I think just that's a change that we need to see on campaigns just broadly. We need to see that shift because there are people that are being left behind. So that's really what we're focused on at NDS this year with our voter contact and that I've seen be successful in my past work.

Neal Carter (00:55:28):

Now I'll just say, this is Neal speaking, just to add to Dom's point, deep canvassing is wonderful. My hope is that with deep canvassing, what that means is, it's a more granular idea from what it's a concept that folks on the left side of the aisle, it's a messaging that started with meeting folks where they are. For those of us in progressive space, we've heard that over the last several cycles, and I'm not going to tell you where that phrase came from, but if you Google it, you'll find that there's a certain founder and principle of a certain political concern firm that has been around since in the 20 years that is on this call, that came up with that phrase, but they didn't attribute me with it, but that's okay. I'm not crying over spilled milk as far as coming up with that phrase is concerned, I'm just glad it was implemented. But meeting voters where they are, isn't just a catchphrase, it's exactly that. It's connecting with voters where they're at, whether it be group homes, congregate settings, non-institutions. In fact, I feel like campaigns that are doing their best to advocate for disabled people should be doing their best to try to eliminate, try to restructure, try to shift disabled people out of institutions. Those of us who have been disabled and in disability justice work know how harmful institutions are. No matter how hard they try to advocate for us, we know how harmful they are.

(00:57:13):

But that aside, as it relates to meeting disabled people where they are, what that means is having those, as Dom said, those deep conversations, those lasting conversations, because I'm going to use another catchphrase here, all policy is disabled policy. So when we think about intersections, when we think about policy overall, we need to make sure that when we are thinking about from the lens of disability and interacting with disabled voters, whether it be in group homes or other congregate settings, we need to make sure that and campaigns need to be aware, that disability rights and all of underlying issues within disability policy, are policy that impact everyone.

(00:58:10):

Accessibility impacts not just the disabled community, it impacts everyone. Accessibility helps everyone. If the world is more accessible, everyone lives a better life, not just disabled people. But the problem is, the framework, when we think about accessibility, when we think about disability policy, we only think it impacts one marginalized group, when in fact it impacts everyone. But this is also why I've never run for office before because I'd be too much of a disrupter. They wouldn't like that.

(00:58:47):

Yeah, I really feel like there needs to be more of a focus on meeting, if we are going to have a granular conversation of interacting with and investing in disabled folks lived experiences, those conversations can't be a, "Oh, I'm going to..." Because I've experienced this too in group home settings, and I can't speak for anybody else on the podcast, but I know from my experience, I have done walkthroughs with candidates where they've walked through group homes, said they are going to have the deep conversations, and literally just shook the hands of as many people in the group homes as possible and then walked right out the door, took several pictures, but then walked right out the door, took a picture in front of the group home with the cornucopia of faces that they could for the photo op, but then they got in the car and drove away.

(00:59:47):

That's not a deep conversation. That's not an investment in disabled lived experience. That's pretending to care, pretending to be an advocate, and then completely disregarding and dehumanizing indirectly. So I say all that to say that there are some example, and I'm not going to go into detail as far as which campaigns those were and which candidates those were because that's not important. Those campaigns and those candidates weren't successful. What is important for the future of the electorate of this, despite the fact that we are living in a failed democracy or failing democracy, however you want to phrase it, we have to do a better job of advocating for disabled people, while the democracy is still standing as it stands right now. We have to do a better job of doing that deep investment and not just talking about it for press release needs, podcast needs, media hit needs, photo op needs. That investment has to be actual, there has to be action behind it and ultimately sweat equity.

Jess Moore Matthews (01:01:05):

Yeah. The final thing I'll say on that is I think, this is Jess, I think that when you look at a candidate's time, you're really able to see what the campaign's values are. And I think for folks who have the ability and the privilege to have some control over the candidate's time,

I think you can really map out the sort of culture you want to create on a campaign. That could mean building in time for the candidate to rest or have lunch or spend time in congregating setting to actually speak with people with disabilities.

(01:01:39):

And I think what ends up happening is, if the candidate is living the values of the campaign, it has no choice but to trickle down. I really do believe that culture is top down. And so for those of us who have access to the candidate and are able to impact their schedule in that way, I think it can go a long way to really focus on the sorts of visits, the sorts of canvassing, the sorts of self-care, that we're modeling for the rest of the group.

Sarah Blahovec (01:02:09):

Now, this is Sarah. The last thing I'll add is also just I think part of it for particularly non-disabled candidates is also making sure to recognize any implicit bias or explicit bias, that may influence you in writing off congregating settings as not a place where you're going to find voters or engage community members, whether that's thinking that disabled people aren't politically engaged, whether that's thinking that people in congregating settings all are part of one demographic or one age group, and maybe they're not the group of voters you think that you're targeting for your campaign, you think that they're not going to be likely voters for your campaign.

(01:02:52):

Disability impacts everyone. And so I think that people think about congregating settings as, "Oh, it's just one group of people who are elderly." And also with some ageism there of, "Well, elderly people are not going to like my campaign or vote a certain way because I think that they'll have different views." So making sure that you're recognizing disability bias, ageism as well, and still seeing those as votes that you need to win. Votes are something that you have to earn. They're not something that you're owed and you need to put in the work to be able to do that.

Maddie Crowley (01:03:28):

Thanks y'all, this is Maddie. I remember when this conversation came up in the Access the Vote Summit from September of 2023. This was such a light bulb moment for me personally, even though I'm not in really the elective or civic engagement politics space, but as a person who works at Disability Rights Florida and is a part of the network of people that have a responsibility and authority to help people living in congregating settings, institution, jails, prisons, group homes, et cetera, to be able to access the vote, this was a

moment where I really sat with the fact that it was a part of campaigning that I hadn't considered, even though again, I'm not in that space. It's still important that it's brought to the forefront for our network and civil rights agencies writ large, because it's this kind of outreach and work is just not being done.

(01:04:36):

And I think the more we talk about it, the more awareness is going to come to the fact that I think those living in congregate settings are the least supported, and it needs to be just completely the other way around. And more resources and investment and time need to go to ensuring that people, for whatever reason they're living in these areas, they have the access to the information and services that they rightfully deserve. And with that one thing, I'm turning the conversation, but also following up to everything y'all just said. How do we ensure that those living in congregate settings have access to voting info? They have vote by mail ballots that they can vote on election day, et cetera, but also, how do we ensure that those living in congregate settings or just people with disability writ large, have access and accurate information about elections? What resources can y'all point them to?

Sarah Blahovec (01:05:40):

This is Sarah. So one of my other hats that I wear is working with American Association of People with Disabilities who write their Rev Up state voting guides, and I've been doing that, this will be my third year. And these are our state by state voting guides that include all of the regular information that you have in terms of voting rights. What's the voter registration deadline? What kind of ID do I need to bring? But there's also other information that is really missing from most voter guides, most websites, sometimes it's stuff that I have to get. These are things like, can I vote if I am under guardianship? What are the laws in my state? What options are available for accessible vote by mail or remote voting? Is it something where some states have where you can receive an electronic ballot and some of them have where you can return electronically.

(01:06:34):

These are really limited to voters with disabilities and what we call UOCAVA voters, which are people who are overseas military voters. I would say only around 10 states have the electronic return, but around 30 have some sort of electronic delivery, whether that's through a portal or through an email, and you can use a screen reader to fill it out and then print it off.

(01:06:57):

Other information in there is, what are the rules around assistance? Is it something where I am going to have to follow, or if I need a helper, I'm going to have to follow specific roles. That person has to sign an affidavit for helping me. Are there restrictions around who can return my ballot if I'm voting by mail? What's the curbside voting situation like? So this is all, again, information that is often missing or hard to find. Sometimes it's hard to find things like we also include restrictions for people who have felony convictions. It can be challenging to find all the updated information on this and also written in a way that is easy to understand because we incorporate it as much as possible, plain language. I worked with three different plain language experts last year to help to translate these concepts into easier to understand information. And so those are available on AAPD's website. Again, we're going to be putting some up for 2024 as well.

(01:07:58):

But yeah, it's something where a lot of this information on voting and voting rights and specific tools that are available for people with disabilities and voters with disabilities, are not often available. Curbside voting is something that a lot of us in this space have heard of. It's something that a lot of disabled people haven't heard of. It's something that's often not well publicized or not even something that a lot of local election offices know that they're technically allowed to do. So I think also that's where proactive relationships between the disability community, disability advocacy organizations, especially at the local level, building up those relationships and those conversations with election officials about what can be changed, what can we improve, how was voting accessibility this election, and what can be done better the next one, will help to make the process more accessible, because that's still certainly a challenge.

Maddie Crowley (01:08:56):

Curious if anyone else could speak to that. I think too, one thing... This is Maddie, I apologize. One thing I'd love to hear, for those that have done campaign work, what kind of efforts have you all invested in as far as outreach to the disability community, maybe using tools from REV UP? Florida's Access the Vote Coalition is the Florida chapter of REV UP that Disability Rights Florida works closely with. How do you get that info out to folks? How do you ensure that people have that info?

Dom Kelly (01:09:30):

Yeah, this is Dom. On the last campaign that I worked on or the group in [inaudible 01:09:39] I worked on, we actually sent voters to resources, mostly nonpartisan groups like REV UP. We would make sure that they check their voter registration status. We taught

them how to do that in Georgia using the Secretary of State's website. But I think what we are doing at New Disabled South, and what I think campaigns and movement orgs can do better is to make sure that there is accurate information about the specific laws and requirements around voting because they've changed so much. Since 2020, we have seen an onslaught of anti-voting legislation across the country, and that has impacted people's ability to request and receive an absentee ballot. It's impacted their ability to figure out whether they can curbside vote or not. So I think orgs need to be on top of those changes.

(01:10:44):

They need to make sure that they're gathering accurate information. And then most importantly, delivering that information in an accessible way. We're really focusing on ensuring that any of the messaging we use, that we develop, literature, all of that is in plain language because so much of this can be very confusing. It's confusing to me and so many people, and it's intentionally confusing sometimes. Sometimes these voting laws in different states and municipalities are made to confuse people for that very reason. So making sure that it's in plain language is a really great way to do that. There are people that can translate into plain language. You don't need to know how to write in plain language yourself, you can hire people. But we're really looking at making sure our lit also has braille. For people who use braille, making sure that we don't just have physical literature, but there is a place that is online where folks can go to if they need to get that kind of information.

(01:11:46):

Making sure that talking points for organizers and canvassers and volunteers who are doing phone banking and text banking are all in plain simple language that they have the kind of accurate information that they need. And then also making sure that we... One of the things we want to do this year is really work with voter protection hotlines to make sure that they have accurate information they can share with disabled voters. Because oftentimes, I have talked to disabled voters who have said that the voter protection hotlines have either been inaccessible and or they don't know how to help them. And that's a lack of training, that's a lack of education. And I think that's one of the gaps that we're hopefully trying to fill this election cycle as well, and that I think state parties need to do better about, and I hope is like the disability caucuses at state parties can start to fill in some of those gaps as well.

(01:12:36):

And so that it's not, so that we don't have to rely on non-profit organizations to do those sorts of things, but yeah. So I think that's really important, is like trying to fill those gaps

that maybe voter protection hotlines and other voter protection organizations maybe are not thinking about in terms of disabled voters.

Jess Moore Matthews (01:12:53):

Yeah, the thing at Outplug is, I am a big fan of digital as a means to an end. Actually, some folks are surprised to hear I'm a big believer in mail. I have worked on campaigns in which my team has set up accessible digital ads to raise money to get mail in front of more people. And obviously making sure that, as Dom mentioned, that the mail is written in plain language, that the color is accessible, et cetera. It's just another way to potentially meet folks where they are, as Neal has said multiple times over the past 20 years. I just think it's really important that, and this has been mentioned, that we get really creative when it comes to reaching folks, and that we think outside the box. And digital fundraising has allowed a lot of campaigns to get creative with in-person tactics and literature. I've seen literature in braille before. I've seen folks do a lot of cool things based on their ability to fundraise digitally. So that is something that I will add to this specific topic.

Keith Casebonne (01:14:03):

So looking at some other directions, this is Keith by the way, looking for some other directions that people with disabilities can get involved. What are some of those ways to get involved in civic engagement? We could talk about anywhere from being a poll worker to joining a campaign, maybe even running for office themselves. Let's talk a little bit about that and that increased involvement in civic engagement in elections.

Neal Carter (01:14:30):

Sure. So I would say, to anyone who is thinking about running for office, obviously, reach out to anyone. This is Neal speaking. Reach out to New Disabled South. If you are in one of the states that they're focusing on, if you're looking for more of a national, if you are outside of their state by state scope, obviously reach out to Disability Victory as well. We can help you and put you in a great position to be successful in your run for elected office, and also put you in contact with organizations that can also benefit you outside of the scope of our organizations as well because of our partnerships and things of that nature. I'd also say, if community engagement outside of the realm of, let's say, running for office isn't necessarily something that you're interested in, but being a community advocate for the community, the disabled community that you represent, that you have the lived experience in.

(01:15:27):

I think there are far too few disabled folks not involved in the advocacy of the disability group, multiple or singular, that they fall in. And what I mean by that is when we think about the advocacy organizations that are supposed to advocate for disabled people. I'm not talking about the nonprofits represented on this podcast. What I am talking about is some of these organizations that may have a specific disability in their name, but when you look at the makeup of their staff, their board, and who is running the organization, none of them have the lived experience of a disability. They may have a familial connection, but they don't have a lived experience connection themselves. So while, yes, I think it's important, yes, I am saying that there are always opportunities from an electoral standpoint. Think also about your own lived, experienced, disabled community advocacy organizations as well, not just local to your region, but also national organizations as well.

(01:16:42):

Think about and invest in researching who is actually on these boards and take it, the next step. And if you are paying for membership to these organizations specifically to advocate for you, whether it be at the local level or at the federal level, you have that added incentive to find out from these organizations, specifically, who is doing that advocating work and what is their connection to the disability that you happen to have? Because we don't do enough, because we in the disability community a lot of times often do the self-deprecating, oh, it's not up to us. We don't have to do it. We're only going to focus on ourselves kind of approach as it relates to disability advocacy. We don't do enough of taking a deep diving look into some of these organizations that are supposed to be advocating for us and they're doing nothing of this sort. And to take it a step further, they may even have advocacy in their name and they don't do advocacy.

(01:17:54):

So think about that. And I didn't want to get on the soapbox of trying to separate and trying to say, again, there aren't opportunities in the electoral space. But I also think we in the disability community don't do enough of recognizing that we can be in two buckets simultaneously. We can be advocating for ourselves, we can be advocating for our community, and we can be looking at electoral policy, disability policy because again, they're all connected. We can be looking about how to expand the worldview of not just the people in our own circles, we can look out, we can look to expand the worldview of everyone else around us too.

(01:18:36):

So that's what I think we need to... When I think about getting involved, I just don't think about, "Hey, go to your local political party, go to your local board of elections and become

a..." Yes, I think it's important for every disabled person with the capacity to go to their Board of Elections and become a registrar. I think every disabled person that has the capacity to do that should do that because there should be more disabled people registering people. Not just disabled people, but people to vote. That should be paramount. But in addition to that, I think we also need to do a better job of, again, holding accountable these advocacy organizations that are supposed to be advocating for any number of disabilities or singular disabilities, and they're not actually doing that actual work. And the makeup of their organizations don't reflect the disability that they're supposed to be advocating for.

Sarah Blahovec (01:19:35):

This is Sarah. And I'd also add to that, look at the local community. I think a lot of people, there's a lot of national organizations, they get a lot of attention. But the local is really where it starts, whether you're running for office as a local candidate, working on a local campaign. But another big thing that comes up is local commissions. So in my town, which is Alexandria, Virginia, we have a ton of them. There is a commission for citizens with disabilities. There are different ones working around zoning and housing, and these help really determine the direction of policy day-to-day in local government. And they are really important advisors working within government. Also, local libraries. So library boards are incredibly important right now. I think there's been a lot of discussion about what's in libraries and what shouldn't be in libraries.

(01:20:29):

And in the disability community, it's important to respect the diversity of our community, whether that's diversity of disability, but also of other identities. And so making sure that we have people who are informed and who are advocating for truly inclusive libraries that are able to give people the resources they need to feel welcome in their communities, to get the best experience out of going to the libraries. I love libraries so much because they are, I think, one of the most important services that our communities have, and one of the most important things that our tax dollars are going to. And we see that now under attack in places like New York City where they're cutting library hours and days, and putting more money into other things like the police, bumping up the police budget. And so it's taking resources away from the community and putting it more towards punishment that disproportionately hurts black and brown people, lower income people.

(01:21:28):

And so we need to make sure that we have strong advocates for public services like the library where people can get everything that they need for... In my community, they have passport services, they have English, second language, things like that. So yeah, there are so many different ways to get involved. I'm also like Neal. I think I'm pretty much unelectable at this point, so I'm not going to be running for office. There are political appointments at the local, and state, and federal level. Getting involved in campaigns as a volunteer, as staff. Getting involved in organizations, joining nonprofit boards, becoming poll workers, working with different organizations, joining a REV UP coalition in your state. Or if you don't have one in your state, the REV UP organizers are always looking to expand and have new coalitions in other places. So there's plenty of opportunities to find something that you are passionate about. And also, that works with you, works with what your needs are, your interests are, you are making sure that you're able to still prioritize your wellbeing.

Jess Moore Matthews (01:22:34):

I really resonate with what Sarah just said, and I'm preaching to myself a little bit. I've been very nationally focused in the last several years, and I think a lot of us have been because that's just the media cycle and the way it works. I really would love to make the day after election day a thing. Like who was elected in your town? Who are your new representatives? What are their social media platforms? What did they run on? What did they say they would do? And when is that first commissioners meeting or town council meeting, and will it be streamed? And can you introduce yourself? I am imagining a future in which those of us who call ourselves voters and show up for every election, no matter what year it is, we're not just Googling on the way to the polls, who's on the ballot, what do they stand for?

(01:23:24):

We actually know these people and we know whether or not they did what they said they were going to do. And so I think that's where it starts. And for those of us who may run one day, I do think it's important to understand who's in those positions and what do you like that they did, what do you not? And what could they be doing better? And I think it really starts with the unsexy side of this work, which is those long boring town council meetings, and tracking votes, and understanding the things we've got. I talk a lot about this, so I should probably bring it up at my commissioner's meeting, but we've got this street that our neighborhood is on that has zero streetlights. And it's really... It's one lane. And I always think about how I want to move before my son is able to drive one day because I don't want him driving down that street, or his dad.

(01:24:12):

The streetlights are something I could bring up at a town council meeting. And so I want to echo what Sarah said about really getting hyperlocal with your own community and understanding what's happening in your backyard as a place to start. And that could be reading town council minutes, tuning into the live stream, showing up in person, introducing yourself, or even just following the representatives that you have. And you have a lot of representatives, by the way. It's not just your town councilor who was elected to your Senate, who was elected to...

Dom Kelly (01:24:41):

Yeah. This is Dom. I just completely agree with all of that. I think about running for office once a year, and then I also am probably pretty unelectable at this point. But I think just to really drive home the critical, the importance of local government, that is where change happens. We just hear so much about the presidential election, and that is of course an important election. But what happens in our day-to-day lives is shaped by what happens in our city hall or in our local government building. And there are so many ways to get involved there. An example is, I went to my mayor who lives three houses down the street from me. And I was already on her advisory council and I said, "We really need a focus on disability inclusion and accessibility in this city. Can we really focus on that in your new term?"

(01:25:42):

And she said, "Absolutely. Yeah. You want to spearhead that? Let's go for it." I am sure that most government officials in your local community would be thrilled to hear your ideas. Whether or not they implement them is one thing, but they need to hear from you and your perspective matters. And so there are so many ways locally to get involved. And then beyond electoral politics and government, I think that we as a community have to think about how we work outside of these systems because at the end of the day, government is not going to save us. Local government, federal government, state government. There are bureaucracies, there are biases, there's money involved, there's all sorts of things. And so we need this disability justice principle of interdependence. What comes to mind is, we have to help each other, we get to save each other. And so that means maybe I get my neighbors together and we have our own council and we figure out how to provide each other with the care that we need. We do some mutual aid or we raise some money for people in our community who are struggling. I get the disabled folks in my community together and we figure out how we can build a care web. There are so many different ways that we can work outside of these systems that we think are the be-all, end-all, but we have to. Especially now in this moment, especially during Covid and this pandemic.

Especially while we see our government use our taxpayer dollars to commit atrocities, to completely... To lie to the people about what they plan to do and do the exact opposite. I think that we have more power than we think we do often, and I think we can really figure out how to make change in our communities with each other without having to work within these systems that continue to oppress our people. So I think we have to be creative in that way.

Maddie Crowley (01:27:51):

Yeah. I think doing our best to support those who don't have access to vote and need the information. That they need an accessible languages, whether that's plain language, other languages, whatever these various... Just access needs are, as long as we're doing our absolute best to give people the resources they need. I think what's so wonderful about this conversation is I was actively jotting down all of these specific examples and things, so I'm going to be absolutely sure to share the different programs that you all have found successful, share your organizations, all of these things. Because one thing that you all had mentioned over and over is that disabled people know. We know what works. We know what will work, how to fix things, and what community knowledge will get us closer to our goals.

(01:28:42):

And as long as we can continue to amplify those resources and be sure to share those with those who need it most, I think we're going to be in a better place. And yeah, I would just close this out by thanking you all so much for being here today, for your time. I know we've been recording, it's almost two hours. And I truly appreciate you all taking the energy to share all this info. And we'll be sure to link to your organizations, to your work, and to all the great stuff you all are doing this year. So thank you so much.

Keith Casebonne (01:29:20):

Thanks again to Neal, Sarah, Jess, and Dom for being on today's episode. We had a really great time chatting with all of you.

Maddie Crowley (01:29:26):

Yeah, I did. I love connecting with all of them. And again, I just look up to each of them so much. So it's always so cool to get to talk to these people.

Keith Casebonne (01:29:35):

Yeah, for sure.

Maddie Crowley (01:29:36):

Yeah. And for more information about each of them and their organizations, check out our website or the show notes wherever you're listening.

Keith Casebonne (01:29:44):

Yeah. And stay tuned for future episodes where, as we mentioned in the beginning, we will delve more into voting specifics like accessible voting, voting laws, and so much more. Just remember, your voice matters, so does your vote. It's never too early to start talking about this stuff. Yes, this drops in January, but I think we'd argue that's the perfect time to start getting involved.

Maddie Crowley (01:30:03):

Yeah, for sure. And to make sure that you get notifications when those episodes drop, subscribe to the podcast wherever you're listening. We're on all podcast platforms. And you can also listen or read the transcript of each episode on our website at disabilityrightsflorida.org/podcast. And again, please share this episode with people in the election space, in advocacy spaces, just anything. We really feel that people could truly benefit from this info.

Keith Casebonne (01:30:38):

Yes, indeed. Thanks so much for listening. As always, please email any feedback, questions, or ideas about the show to podcast at [disabilityrightsflorida.org](mailto:podcast@disabilityrightsflorida.org). We'll see you next time.

Announcer (01:30:53):

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